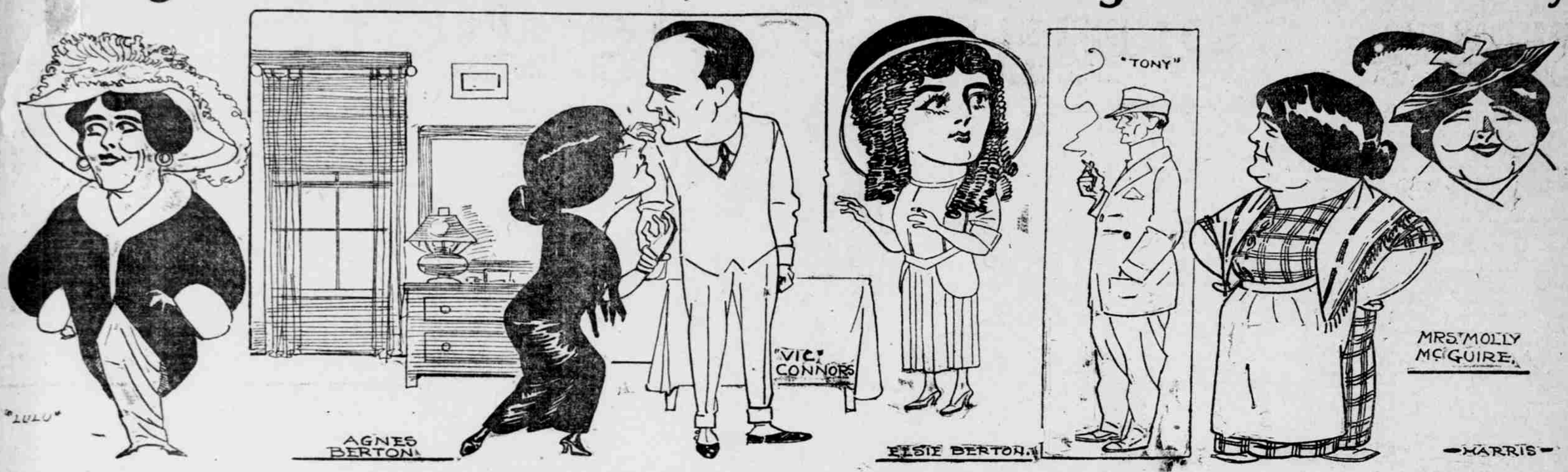
Looking Over "The Traffic," the Astounding White Slave Play



By RICHARD HENRY LITTLE.
[Chicago Examiner, Dec. 7, 1913.]

I WENT to see "The Traffic" under protest. I had been frightened out by all the presidents of women's clubs and the clergy and the Society For the Prevention of Cruelty to Newspaper Reporters and the Association for the Amelioration of Suffering Among the Unlettered Hinds of Tula Tulla.

I stayed to "The Traffic" because it was a great play—great in the sense that it gripped me and held me tight. I couldn't have gone if I had wanted to. It isn't the sweetest play in the world; but, land of love, there's a lot of sweet plays! Somebody said long before I had a chance to get to it that variety is the very spice of life.

"The Traffic" is cold, hard, merciless. It sends thrill after thrill down your spine, and it shocks you again and again. But it shocks your self complacency and not your sense of decency.

But all that is not to the point. "The Traffic" held me first of all because it is a strong, intensely interesting play. It had the big elements of love and hatred and hope and despair. It had a story that made you feel that you couldn't afford to miss a single line. It had characters that were as natural as life. You could walk over to a certain part of this big city and meet them at any hour of the day or night, only I hope you don't. The play is real and vital and photographic in the way it reveals life.

But it's a play; that's the point I want to emphasize. I want to dwell on that, both because I think it's true and because I think it ought to be brought out stronger and because I want to be original.

But I really think that "The Traffic" as a play has received slight attention. Probably Miss Marshall, who wrote it, and those who have financed the play are to blame for that. They have seen in the play only the pitiless expose of the white slave traffic. They have seen in it what Miss Marshall probably intended—a sermon on an evil which we are just beginning to comprehend and to attempt to put down.

I don't want to say that I am indifferent to this gigantic and awful crime of our civilization. I believe that we should do everything possible to abate it. And I am the more in favor of "The Traffic" that it is bound to open the eyes of a great many people who have unfortunately been blind to this thing before.

But I don't believe in obtaining money under false pretenses. If I go to a meeting—and I have been to many—to consider ways of ridding society of white slavers, I want to be told just what the meeting is and not be lured there under pretense that it is a tango dancing class.

When something is advertised as a play and I go to the theater and lay down my money for a seat I want that thing inside to be a play and not somebody or other's ideas of reconstructing society. I don't care if the views expressed by the author agree with my ideas. That makes no difference. I have not gone to the theater to have somebody agree with my ideas. I have gone to see a play to be lifted out of myself, to have my emotions aroused or soothed, or, anyhow, something done with 'em. But I insist that no one has a right to entrap me in a theater and hold me by the thought of the money I spent in the box office and how it would all be wasted if I went away and then shoot a preachment on this subject or that at my head.

There has been so much said in the papers and on the billboards about the great moral lessons in "The Traffic" and how it would make me a nobler man and a better woman and scare me into going to church for the rest of my life that I wasn't very keen about seeing it.

But "The Traffic" was, first and foremost, a good, big play. Those people on the stage were real. The play had all the elements required of a good play. It stirred me. And it held me to the last curtain.

So I was willing to take the lessons the play contained and about which so much has been said. But I had to have the play first. As long as the play measured up what I expected to find in a theater I was willing that the author should impart as many moral lessons as she could.

And there is a strong moral lesson in "The Traffic." Those critics who have declared that the play is merely a pitiless presentation of horrible facts and that it leaves no lesson at all must have a different idea from what I have of what constitutes a moral lesson. I think the author and the producers of "The Traffic" have clung to the moral lesson of the play when they might have counted on producing a much pleasanter impression on their audiences and pleasing the majority of theater goers by giving the regulation happy ending.

People will generally forgive everything else in a book or a play if they can only have the happy ending. But while the ending of "The Traffic" is not happy, it is true. "The Traffic" is written so unflinchingly, almost cold bloodedly, true to life that to redeem the woman of the piece and marry her off to a nice but mushy young man would be nothing short of a crime. It would at once condemn all that had gone before as cheap claptrap.

But the woman of "The Traffic," after she has been entrapped into a life of shame and held in bondage in "a house" and then kills her seducer and is freed by a jury, does not renounce her black past and declare that forever after she will be happy and good.

That's where the lesson comes in. If the girl was permitted to fall into the arms of the weak faced young man who steps heroically forward to save her after she has been permitted by society to quaff the cup of bitterness to the dregs, then indeed would the moral effects of "The Traffic" be unspeakably bad.

It would leave the impression that a girl might be a denizen of the segregated district and look forward to an honorable marriage and a life of happiness. This wouldn't be true to life. Through the wonderful work that is carried on by various associations of noble women a girl is now and then rescued from this awful maelstrom of vice.

But such cases are exceptions and not the rule. And those that are saved are not rescued by any fortuitous happening or by a fairy story prince. The fact is that a person who treads the road traveled by Agnes in "The Traffic" is, generally speaking, lost absolutely and utterly. Even the fact that Agnes did not take this path intentionally; that she got into it through love for her sick sister and was duped and trapped by a scoundrel, makes no difference.

No matter whether a person goes into this life willingly or unwillingly, wittingly or unwittingly, the result is the same. This is one of the lessons, probably the big lesson, of "The Traffic"—that sin is sin and that punishment cannot be avoided.

Although the sympathetic jury freed Agnes when she was tried for the murder of the man who had dragged her down into the mire, still there was one person from whom she could get no pardon—herself. The life she had been led into had burned its brand upon her. She was marked indelibly for life. Happiness only mocked her; whether she would or not, she must return to the depths. It's that way in life, and "The Traffic" gives us no delusions.

Perhaps the lesson Miss Marshall wanted to impress by the final degradation of Agnes was not only a warning to girls that there is no golden, flower decked path that leads away to sunshine and the heights from the plague spots of the city, but also that the time for society to start saving its girls is not after they have taken the step, but before.

All of which shows that for a person who dislikes preaching and propaganda in the theater, the author of "The Traffic" succeeded in forcing me to take quite a dose, but I repeat that it couldn't have been done if "The Traffic" first and foremost had not been a play. It was so good as a play that one becomes interested and then mightily concerned over its theme and does more thinking in regard to it after leaving the theater than at the time.

"The Traffic" is not so remarkable that it takes hold with such an iron grip on a subject that has been taboo among us as for the manner in which it does it.

It minimizes nothing, avoids nothing, but throws back the door and pours the light into the remotest corners of the social evil. But the remarkable thing is that it does this—it shocks and horrifies and fairly numbs us with what it portrays, yet in no instance is there a violation of propriety and good taste. That is the wonder of the thing. And that is why plays dealing with a similar theme to "The Traffic" have had to be withdrawn by order of the police or have failed because people do not wish to risk contamination by going to see them. "The Traffic" deals with the gravest social problem we have and deals with it in a stronger, more aggressive and absolutely unblenching way than any other play has exhibited and yet it does not offend good taste.

Just why can hardly be explained. That is where the skill of the playwrights and producers came in. For one thing, the awful incidents in "The Traffic" happen off stage, and they are only suggested to the audience, and yet so powerfully is this suggestion given that the effect on the audience is much stronger than the actual stage representation of the incident would be. That is craftsmanship.

The Theatre

THE ILLINOIS.

March 8—"The Traffic."
March 9—"Excuse Me."
March 15—"Peg o' My Heart."
March 16 — "Bunty Pulls the Strings."
March 17—"Bought and Paid For."
March 22—Eva Tanguay and her vaudeville company.

THE EMPIRE.

High class vaudeville and tabloids. Matinee 2:45 and evening 8:15, except Wednesday and Sunday, when there are two shows at 7:30 and 9:15.

Maggie Pepper

CAST OF CHARACTERS.

Hattie Murphy .....Ruth Donnelly
Imogene Kelly.....May Guyer
Elevator Boy.....Edward Finch
Jake Rotchschild.....Frank Manning
Mrs. Thatcher.....Adele Adams
John Hargen.....Harry Maitland
Ethel Hargen.....Josephine Bernard
Murchison .....Harry Penn
Joe Holbrook.....John S. Robertson
Maggie Pepper.....Rose Stahl
Ada Darkin.....Jean Thomas
Zaza .....Lillian Claire
Johnson .....Sam Field
James Darkin.....Percival T. Moore
Johannan.....Ann Carlton
Expressman .....Albert Goldberg
Detective Bailey.....Frank Hand

Rose Stahl showed an audience at the Illinois theatre last night how it is possible for one of her sex to rise from cash girl in a department store to chief adviser to the owner and finally to be courted by the latter and won by him for his wife.

It's not to be expected that every girl in the ribbons department hereabout, after hearing what Maggie accomplished, will get the idea in her head that she can go as far as this red-headed clerk in Klein's emporium did, but it will not cost her anything to dream in that direction, and then, too, it might whet her ambition a trifle and at any rate aid her in getting farther than she would were she not to exercise her head after the fashion of Maggie Pepper of the play.

Of course it's not all easy sledding for Maggie. The hardest blow comes when, after 15 years in the store, the manager of the suit department resigns. Maggie is her assistant. Maggie naturally expected to be promoted. But she wasn't. A friend of the niece of the manager of the store was chosen for the vacancy. The day Maggie received her notice a young fellow with a high hat and a cane drops in and begins a conversation with Maggie. The latter deals in real shop talk and proceeds to tell the young fellow how she would run the business if she had her way. The management of the store was unsparingly criticised for its old fogy methods.

The strange young man turned out to be Holbrook, the owner of the store, who had just returned from Europe, wearied of the butterfly life and anxious to settle down and learn the department store business from the bottom up. He is interested in Maggie because he feels she can teach him the game. When he learns of the notice of dismissal she has received he has it recalled.

Maggie becomes first assistant to Manager Holbrook. In fact, she really runs the whole business, with the result that it increases with leaps and bounds. Holbrook is engaged to be married to Ethel Hargen, niece of John Hargen, general manager of the Holbrook store. Ethel grows jealous of Maggie. She demands that Maggie be dismissed.

Maggie, refusing longer to face the insults that are heaped upon her because of her business intimacy with Holbrook, throws up her job. She is just about to start for Europe on a buying trip for another firm when Holbrook comes to her apartments, tells her that he has broken his engagement with Miss Hargen, and asks Maggie to marry him because he finds he can't get along without her, for it is she who made him. Of course Maggie at first refuses, but finally she consents and becomes the real head of the big store she entered as a $2 a week cash girl.

Miss Stahl, always an artist, is happily cast as "Maggie Pepper," a character that Charles Klein wrote for her following her success as "The Chorus Lady." In "Maggie Pepper" she has a supporting company in which there is not a perceptible weak spot. The play was well received by a large audience.

A woman's name on the author-line of "The Traffic" program, which comes to the Illinois tomorrow for a return engagement, does more for demonstrating woman's equality with man than a thousand raving Pankhursts breaking bobbies' helmets. The woman's name is Rachael Marshall. Miss Marshall wrote "The Traffic." How came this woman to know these intimate twists—to hold communion with these shrouded skeletons of the forbidden closets? How found she her way where the outsider more rarely enters than the beggar into the throne room? In the book from which Rachael Marshall tore the pages for her tragic comedy there is a chapter that he who runs may scan; every child knows its every fable. But there is another written in the crimson of bleeding souls against a background blacker than their sins—and this is locked to the eye of the staring saunterer past the shelves where stand the volumes de luxe of the libraries of infamy. The strange customs, ideals and heart-throbs of a strange tribe recorded in the scarlet day-books of the fallen—written but only repeated by each generation since woman was born weak and man coveted his neighbor's daughter—have remained the secrets of the ages. The few who read the scrolls upon those pages and came again into the daylight of the other worlds prated rarely, even in whispers, of the author's annotations, the thinly pencilled interlineations and the manuscript marks visible to the sharp reader but not meant for him. There is an enormous something about the gleam of the forbidden—the family secrets of the world's largest family—that silences the confidante. Comes now this amazing woman and cries from the housetops that which an eternity has held in silence. So few have known as she knows that few can understand her. But the voice of Rachael Marshall must take echo and that which so long has been the secret of the few shall now be known to the multitude.

With a record of nine months at the Gaiety theatre in New York and having every feature which caused it to be hailed as the best farce theatre-goers had been offered in years, "Excuse Me," the Rupert Hughes' play which has the subtitle of "A Pullman Carnival," comes to the Illinois Monday. As a play "Excuse Me" has given to Rupert Hughes an eminence as a writer of farce that is shared by no contemporary playwright. It is emphatically a novelty. Throughout its action there is not one instance of mistaken identity, no male person is required to masquerade in feminine garments, and none of the other age-old and now tiresome rules for provoking laughter in this sort of play has been observed. The subtitle is aptly descriptive. Mr. Hughes has taken a score and a half persons from everyday American life, placed them aboard a Pullman sleeper on an Overland flyer bound from Chicago to the Pacific coast, and let things happen. And the things that happen, while they are perfectly logical in their origin and their sequence, keep up laughter for three acts. There are a score of contrasting types in the Pullman's passenger roster and every one is interesting because of himself as well as because of his relation to his fellows. The action of the play is rapid and changeable. The fact that it kept New Yorkers laughing for nine consecutive months is a good argument as to its merits, to which can be added the runs of six months in Chicago and four months in Boston.

"Bunty Pulls the Strings" will be the attraction at the Illinois March 16. "Bunty" is a mild satire in Scotch virtues and foibles. The austure religious practices are shown, coupled with that shrewdness which profits by observation of form and violation of spirit. It depicts the stern patriarchy of a father, who has himself a past, and details with an unerring touch of remarkable delicacy ligats and shadows of Scotch domesticity, frugality and searching canniness, and the small and big impulses of a narrow mountain community deeply imbued with the creed of Calvanism. "Bunty" who pulls the strings, is the daughter of Tammas Biggar, and presides over his household as the successor to her mother who died two years before. Susie Simpson is an old maid and a distant relative, who has loaned Tammas a matter of 120 pounds, which Tammas used to make good the deficiency of an elder son. Miss Simpson compels Tammas to choose between marriage and the restoration of her money, and Tammas is not in a position to liquidate, and in consequence passes a bad Sabbath. Jealousy of an old flame of Tammas impells the vindictive old maid to denounce Tammas in the kirk yard, before the church goers, as a dishonest man, when the inventive "Bunty" promises to make good the amount and averts the theatrical arrest of her father, by confiscating the nest egg of her wedding with honest, lumbering Wellum Sprunt. The rest of the play is taken up shewing how Bunty sets all things right, defeating Susie and marrying her father to boyhood love, smoothing the path of her dissatisfied brother, and arranging her own marriage with Wellum. The story is told with untheatric simplicity in terms of unforced humor, and interpreted by actors thoroughly imbued with the spirit of the author.

ONE OF AMUSING SCENES IN "EXCUSE ME"---AT ILLINOIS